

STATEMENT OF JOHN PARSONS, ASSOCIATE REGIONAL DIRECTOR FOR LANDS, RESOURCES AND PLANNING, NATIONAL CAPITAL REGION, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES, CONCERNING S. 1913, A BILL TO AUTHORIZE THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR TO LEASE A PORTION OF THE DOROTHY BUELL MEMORIAL VISITOR CENTER FOR USE AS A VISITOR CENTER FOR THE INDIANA DUNES NATIONAL LAKESHORE

February 16, 2006

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to present the Department of the Interior's views on S. 1913, a bill to authorize the Secretary of the Interior to lease a portion of the Dorothy Buell Memorial Visitor Center for use as a visitor center for the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore. The Department strongly supports enactment of S. 1913. The Administration transmitted a similar proposal to Congress on September 30, 2005.

S. 1913 would authorize the National Park Service (NPS) to use federally appropriated funds to lease space in the Dorothy Buell Memorial Visitor Center, a new visitor facility being built by the Porter County Convention, Recreation and Visitor Commission (PCCRVC) outside the boundary of Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore (national lakeshore). It would also authorize the Secretary of the Interior to enter into a Memorandum of Understanding with the Porter County Convention, Recreation and Visitor Commission prior to entering into a lease agreement. The Memorandum of Understanding would outline the terms of the joint partnership, including cooperative management of the new visitor facility and sharing of operational activities.

The new Dorothy Buell Memorial Visitor Center is located approximately three quarters of a mile south of the national lakeshore boundary on IN 49, the principal north/south artery into the national lakeshore. It will be owned by the PCCRVC and space will be leased to the national lakeshore. The two parties will jointly plan and staff the new visitor center and offer “one-stop shopping” for the visitor with exhibits and theater space to educate them about the resources found in the park, aspects of threatened and endangered species management, habitat preservation, and wetlands restoration.

In 1998, the national lakeshore and the PCCRVC began to explore the concept of a joint visitor center to be shared by the PCCRVC, the national lakeshore, and the Indiana Dunes State Park. Both the national lakeshore and the PCCRVC suffer from low visitation at their respective visitor centers due to their poor locations away from the primary thoroughfares. Only about 66,000 visitors to the national lakeshore, just 3 percent of the park’s 2 million visitors, travel to the existing visitor center each year. Because of the existing visitor center’s inconvenient location, size, and layout, the national lakeshore’s General Management Plan recommended relocating the existing visitor center to the more heavily traveled IN 49 corridor. The old visitor center would then be used exclusively for school programs, which the national lakeshore currently hosts for over 50,000 students per year.

A partnership to acquire land for a new site was initiated. A more prominent location outside the national lakeshore but within the primary travel corridor to the dunes was selected. Using a series of Transportation Enhancement grants, the PCCRVC purchased the land and secured a

contract for construction. The site for the new facility will be the cornerstone of a small commercial center.

A transportation study indicated that the new visitor facility would increase revenue to the area by \$24 million and visitor center visitation by over 300 percent. Commercial tour bus operators would be advised of the new visitor center and could include it as the first stop on their way into the national lakeshore or state park for information and orientation to the area. Local schools also would be directed to the new visitor facility to begin their educational trips to the national lakeshore. Visitor contact facilities and waysides within both the national lakeshore and the state park would provide information regarding the new visitor facility and list its location.

S. 1913 would provide authority to Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore to expend federally appropriated funds outside the boundaries of the park in order to lease space for exhibits, offices, a book store, and a theatre from PCCRVC. It would also authorize the expenditure of funds for the planning, design and development of exhibits to be placed in the new facility in the NPS-leased space and provide NPS staff for visitor information and education.

Passage of S. 1913 would have minimal impact on the park's current budget. The space that would be leased by the NPS includes room for exhibits, offices, a theatre, and a bookstore that would be operated by the national lakeshore's cooperating association. Park staff would be relocated to the new visitor facility to provide education and information, so no additional FTEs are required or expected as a result of this proposal. The national lakeshore will continue to participate in the development of the new visitor facility's design plans, providing input for

enhancing visitor flow and sustainability and offering technical advice on issues such as native landscaping.

A one-time cost of approximately \$1,200,000 would be needed to design, construct, and install exhibits in space leased for the national lakeshore. The NPS would include the project in the next update of its five-year construction plan. Annual lease payments would be approximately \$70,000. This cost increase would be offset within the park's base budget with a reduction in lower priorities, so no additional operational funding would be requested or expected.

Two million visitors travel to Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore each year. Many of them are from the Chicago metropolitan area and are often unaware that the national lakeshore is a unit of the National Park System. By relocating the primary visitor contact point to a more prominent location, the park would have the opportunity to contact and educate four times as many visitors regarding the national lakeshore's programs and resources as well as helping them understand the mission of the National Park Service.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to comment. This concludes my prepared remarks and I will be happy to answer any questions you or other committee members might have.